



Belarus Brief November 2005

Lukashenka's rating:

According to the most recent polls, around 80% of voters are going to take part at Presidential elections (in 2001 and in 2004 the number was more than 80%) – this is 5.600.000 people. In September 2005 the popularity of Alexander **Lukashenka** is **47%**. Taking into account the number of officially registered voters in Belarus¹ this would be 3.315.000 people ready to vote for him today. Lukashenka has been launched and maintained a permanent campaign from the 2004 referendum causing his high personal rating. It is important to note that according to independent exit poll he reached 48% during the 2004 referendum (opposing the officially released 84% result). The coincidence between his current ratings and the exit poll results on the referendum suggests that his maximum rating may not reach the current 47%.²

As the polling shows, if there is no alternative, Lukashenka could win without additional efforts to increase his popularity or election fraud. Therefore major resources of Belarusian supporters of changes must be directed at presenting the alternative to the Belarusian electorate, and creating the atmosphere of change.

Single Candidate ratings:

Although Lukashenka's ratings are high, it must be understood in terms of the current “no alternative” atmosphere of Belarus. Even in the current situation, as much as 38% of citizens believed in May 2005 that there are leaders in Belarus who could govern the country better than Lukashenka, while in September this figure was 45%, which demonstrate the influence of the process of selecting the single candidate.³ Current polls (September 2005⁴) show that

¹ According to data provided by Central Electoral Commission on October 17, 2005 this is 7.000.000

² Number of people ready to vote for Lukashenka today is 59,2% out of total number of those who is going to vote (p.2). 28,4% respondents (open questioning) and 14,2% respondents (closed questioning) found it difficult to answer – this is 2.000.000 to 1.000.000 people (1.500.000 people on average). Analysis shows that up to one third of those not answering to popularity questions would finally vote for the version proposed by the administration. So if we add one third of undecided (500.000) to the number of those ready to vote for Lukashenka today, the number of expected votes in his support would raise up to 3.815.000, which would be 68,1% out of expected number of those who would vote.

³ The current four major efforts at democratic structure may change the current atmosphere in the country: 1) Single candidate campaign (political parties) to present the alternative, and build up his platform, constituency and trust among people, 2) Civic campaign (civil society) create the atmosphere of change, advocating issues where the majority are against the regime (such as injustice, freedom, and other values) and making the large majority of population to accept changes, 3) Mobilization campaign (street protest) to increase number of those willing to take the streets on post-election days. 4) Demobilization campaign targeting law enforcement agencies and authorities to weaken the ruler's control of his own government

⁴ Conducted before the Congress of Democratic Forces which took place on October 1-2, 2005

Milinkevic as party candidate could reach around 15% of the votes, as candidate of democratic opposition he could reach 27%, while as candidate of those currently seeking for an alternative 45%. We have to emphasize that the campaigns of the democratic structures - except the so-called solidarity campaign⁵ - have not started, yet.

Milinkevic's personal rating was less than 3% in May in the direct ballot question (comparing to Lukashenka's 39%). In the September poll he had 11%, while in the end of October - based on tracking poll⁶ - he **reached 21 %**. This suggests that he has possibility to reach the projected 45% (those currently seeking alternative toward Lukashenka⁷) in case of consolidation of political parties will continue and will be able to have new, alternative form of information channels to inform citizens.

One of the key issues is the continuous consolidation of the democratic coalition, where the key is the relations between the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF, Chairman Vincuk Viachorka), and the United Civic Party (UCP, Chairman Anatolij Lebedko, Vice-Chairwomen Lyudmila Gryaznova)⁷. Alexander Milinkevic (although he is non-partisan) was the candidate of the BPF, and he won by eight votes to Lebedko in the Congress. Lebedko was very disappointed after the Congress, but he agreed to head the shadow government. On the contrary, according to a few observers, the BPF – having Milinkevic as the face of the opposition - could focus on strengthening its position within the opposition and society. Such development (on both sides) could lead to lack of focus on the tasks of the upcoming presidential elections.

Additionally, the regime has a chance to decrease the opposition chances through discreditation campaign against Milinkevic (which have not started, yet) and increasing the number of democratic candidates to divide the votes for the alternative. One of the main questions is whether Alexander Kazulin, the former rector of the Belarusian State University, and the head of the Social Democratic Party “Gromada” (the only party not joining the democratic coalition) will run in the elections.

Possible (Post)Elections Scenarios:

There are four possible scenarios for the elections and post-elections development of Belarus:

- *Optimistic:* Milinkevic will win the elections and the opposition will force the authorities to accept the change.
- *Realistic:* reaching 30 – 35 % of votes for the single democratic candidate in the upcoming elections would signal the return of the opposition to the mainstream is a real political power, whose opinion would be taken seriously not only by foreign partners, but by the regime, too. Such a result would send strong messages for Belarusians about the

⁵ The solidarity campaign focusing on the disappeared people, which although an important topic for democratic forces, appears intangible for most of the Belarusians

⁶ Representative poll is conducted on 1504 respondents. Pontis's sociological partners in Belarus - IISEPS and NOVAK - running representative poll monthly. Tracking poll is conducted every 2nd day on 200 respondents allowing to follow the dynamics of ratings.

⁷ These two parties are the main engines of the democratic parties in Belarus, BPF is leading the so-called national-democratic side having nationalistic (and pro-Russian) tendencies, while UCP is on the top of the liberal-conservative line, advocating free market economy and good relations with Russia. Both parties are strongly for independent Belarus, and do not support the unification with Russia by any means.

real alternative to the present regime, and could enhance restructuring within the current system.

- *Pessimistic:* Milinkevic will fail to receive more than 20% of the votes. This will mean backsliding to conformism⁸, similarly to the normalization period of Czechoslovakia (although definitely not that long).
- *Fatalistic:* Belarus as independent country will disappear through integration with Russia

While the realistic than pessimistic scenarios are most likely to happen, based on the current forecast Pontis suggest an important addition to the “optimistic” scenario. If the democratic forces campaign efforts will be well-done and successful, Milinkevic could equal the rating of Lukashenka’s. In this case there are high potential of eruption of conflicts, e.g. even bloodshed is possible given the hard-core attitude of the regime toward any mass protest. To decrease possibility of such scenario, the democratic forces must be successful achieving the atmosphere of change, and push the majority (including Lukashenka supporters) to accept the change.

The most important **role of international community** is raising the costs of the status quo and lowering the costs of transition. Currently in the EU, majority of the member states are for the status quo, given their bilateral relations with Russia, but also the domestic support of Lukashenka in Belarus. Nevertheless, even those countries doing “business as usual” with the current regime, should aid democratic structures, especially supporting new communication and information channels. Given the assessment that Lukashenka will make sure he wins the majority of the EU members states are prepared for long-term process of transformation. One of the efforts of the EU is to decrease the imposed self-isolation of the regime by trying to strengthen official, middle level contacts and strengthen business relations. Such effort, however, could lead to support⁹, and to legitimate Lukashenka’s third term. Since currently there is a reasonable chance that the character of the regime would remain even after Lukashenka leaves, the neo-Soviet, conformist Belarus, and the removal of its main personal representative, should be the main goal of the EU policy before and after the 2006 presidential elections. The question is what tools are best suited for this.

⁸ See more about this in the fresh survey of the Pontis Foundation “Potential for Change or Backsliding to Conformism: Future Trends of Belarus Politics at <http://www.pontisfoundation.sk/11013>

⁹ The EU is already the biggest trading partner of Belarus. See more about this topic at the policy paper “Dependence of Belarus economy on trading with Western European countries and USA, September 2005